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# POLITICS OF CARE VS. BIOPOLITICAL CARE? THE FEMINIST CUT ON NEOLIBERAL SATURATION

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## Abstract

This article aims to address the issue of care within the theoretical and political feminist debate on the recent neoliberal wave. The context addressed is the blurring of the distinction between the public and private spheres, production and reproduction. The text analyses the affinity between biopolitics as taking charge of life and "care" as the way in which women "lead" the living. The neoliberal apparatus engages all the aspects of female subjectivity: emotional, cognitive, relational, performative, and corporeal. Women's family caregiving has itself become part of the formation of a sophisticated "human capital". Furthermore, the article compares different feminist interpretations (Marxist, liberal, and the thought of sexual difference) of the role of care in the neoliberal context. The text checks the practicability of a "political" (not only ethical) use of "care" as a feminist proposal to create a cut in the "neoliberal saturation". It examines if and how it is possible to counteract "biopolitical care" with a politics of "relation", "vulnerability" and "care", with a politics of "partire da sé".

## **Keywords**

Feminism, biopolitical care, neoliberalism, reproduction, vulnerability.

## **Resumen**

El presente artículo aborda el concepto de “cuidado” en el debate teórico-político feminista sobre el neoliberalismo. El contexto de referencia es el de la disolución de la distinción entre esfera pública y privada, entre producción y reproducción. En el texto se analiza la afinidad entre la biopolítica entendida como un hacerse cargo de la vida y el “cuidado” como la modalidad de la mujer de conducir al ser vivo. El aparato neoliberal pone a trabajar la subjetividad femenina, exigiendo la participación de todos sus aspectos: emotivos, cognitivos, relacionales, prestacionales, corporales. Además, se examinan las diferentes lecturas feministas (marxistas, liberales, en función del pensamiento de la diferencia sexual) del papel que ha tenido el cuidado en el ámbito neoliberal. El texto sugiere reconocer la posibilidad de un “uso político” (y no solo ético) del “cuidado” como propuesta feminista para crear un corte en la saturación neoliberal. En particular, se considera la posibilidad y la oportunidad de contraponer al cuidado biopolítico una política de la “relación”, de la “vulnerabilidad” y del “cuidado”, proponiendo una relectura del “partire da sé” del feminismo italiano como práctica del sí mismo antiliberal.

## **Palabras clave**

Feminismo, cuidado biopolítico, neoliberalismo, reproducción, vulnerabilidad.

The notion of care emerged in the feminist debate in the 1980s with the publication of Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*. In her book, Gilligan advocated an "ethics of care" and this philosophical approach continues to play a major role in both the theory of ethics and in applied ethics. Gilligan's crucial merit was that of having approached ethics from a gender perspective, highlighting the relational character of feminine ethics, in contrast with masculine ethics, based on abstract norms and principles. In parallel, Gilligan advocated an open, dependent, relational subjectivity over the abstract, autonomous, neutral subjectivity posited by modern political and moral theory.

Gilligan's views have been criticized from a feminist perspective insofar as her female subject appears to coincide to some extent with that of patriarchal ideology, in which women are viewed as "naturally" loving and nurturing and therefore inclined to taking care of others. But the ethics of care have shown their greatest limits when applied to the political sphere, where its normative and prescriptive character and a lack of distance from neoliberal rationality becomes evident. This is the problem, for example, in the political interpretation of the ethics of care proposed by Joan Tronto in *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993), in which Tronto posits the idea of care (in the broader sense of taking care of oneself, of others, and of the world) as the main principle of a public, pluralistic and democratic ethics<sup>1</sup>.

After 9-11, feminist interpretations of vulnerability and mutual dependence have focused mostly on the opposite of care: on the violence and destructive negation of humanity that is becoming increasingly the norm, in spite of all the good-natured invocations of the importance of care<sup>2</sup>.

Any political reinterpretation of this by now classic feminist theme must necessarily start from a critique of the neoliberal context to which we belong. It is necessary first of all to acknowledge, starting from Foucault, the connection between 'care' and 'governmentality.' From a Foucauldian perspective, 'government' and 'care' refer to a new form of power that acts without resorting to coercion and repression. Rather, through government power determines the margins of the subjects' freedom, defining their possible field of action. In a situation in which 'pastoral power' is no longer aimed a guiding towards the salvation of the other world but at promoting health, well-being, and safety, the 'care' of the living becomes central to the mechanism of governmentality. Butler

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1. J. Tronto has recently returned to this question in her *Caring Democracy. Markets, Equality and Justice*, New York University Press, New York, 2013.

2. J. Butler, *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, New York, 2004.

observes how biopolitics orients lives towards precariousness in a differential fashion<sup>3</sup>, selecting some lives as valuable and deserving care, while other lives are excluded from this order, left to fend for themselves, deprived of value to the point of not being even worthy of mourning. Foucault himself, after all, had identified ‘thanatopolitics’ as inseparable from ‘biopolitics’<sup>4</sup>.

In the feminist debate on gender difference in Italy, Angela Putino in her *Amiche mie isteriche*,<sup>5</sup> emphasizes the connections between the dimension of female/maternal care and the programmed dimension of the care of the living that characterize biopolitics. The current historical period is characterized by a transition from a sovereign power which has the right to put subjects to death (the figure of the sovereign being characterized by a close resemblance to that of the father) to a biopower conceived as care, protection, as an action that acts on other actions, as a modality of influencing behaviors. Putino’s criticism was directed not only towards Italian feminism of difference, which posited motherhood at the center of its symbolic order,<sup>6</sup> but also towards feminist proponents of the ethics of care, which in those years were widespread. Putino saw the ethics of care as an unwitting compliance by feminism with the neoliberal tendency to change the focus from the living to life, seen as a naked and pauperized condition that must be protected, organized, directed. To reinsert the question within a complex view of the living and of politics, Putino invoked, against the paradigm of care, the desire for life and experience, *eros* as the basis for a feminist politics of bodies.

But let us consider more closely the forms in which the neoliberal perspective manifests itself. Neoliberal governmentality tends to erase the boundary between public and private, production and reproduction. The distinction between ‘material’ work and cognitive-affective work is blurred, while bodies, relations, differences are increasingly put to work in a pervasive economy that acts through the self-regulation of the subject, the entrepreneurship of the self. Some philosophers have criticized the process that posits the ‘naked life,’ its reproduction and maintenance at the center of modern politics, depriving contemporary political action of any liberating and creative import (the

3. J. Butler, “Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life? Adorno Prize Lecture”, in *Radical Philosophy*, 176, November/December, 2012, p. 10.

4. M. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, Picador, New York, 1997, p. 229.

5. Cfr. A. Putino, *Amiche mie isteriche*, Cronopio, Napoli, 1998.

6. Putino is here referring to Luisa Muraro, *L'ordine simbolico della madre*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1991. Naturally the question of the relation with the mother and of maternal authority cannot be reduced completely to that of biopolitics. For a re-signification of motherhood outside a biopolitical perspective allow me to refer the reader to my own *La materiale vita. Biopolitica, vita sacra, differenza sessuale*, Mimesis, Milano, 2016. On the elimination of the ‘maternal’ from Western philosophy and civilization see S. Tarantino, *ανευ μητρος/ senza madre. L'anima perduta dell'Europa*. Maria Zambrano e Simone Weil, La scuola di Pitagora, Napoli, 2014.

process of depoliticization indicated by Arendt which begins with modernity).<sup>7</sup> Others see the mechanism on which the exclusion of the 'naked life' from the public sphere is based as a form of 'excluding inclusion' that turns the excluded, discarded element, the 'leftover,' into a threat or perturbation *ab origine* of the established order on account of its very ejection.<sup>8</sup>

But along with the 'naked life' something else was removed from Western political history: the body of Antigone, buried alive outside the walls of the *polis*. For this reason, feminist theories and practices have always explicitly questioned the separation between public and private sphere, between the social and the political, between family and society, highlighting how the social contract hid a more fundamental (because hidden) sexual contract, which divided up work and power in favor of men.<sup>9</sup> This position, at least in the so-called radical feminism, is distinct from the neoliberal perspective, which erodes the space of politics by including everything into the economy, and also resists the temptation to overcome the public/private dualism by progressively including the public sphere into the private dimension. Rather it is an effort to expand the political horizon, through a larger and more complex view of politics. 'It is already politics' wrote the Italian feminist Carla Lonzi in 1970,<sup>10</sup> to suggest a new form of politics, a movement that started from material existence, the body, the desire of every woman, which opened new horizons, new relations, new verbal and political practices. From this perspective, feminist theories and practices continue to be decisive for the definition of the possible forms of a politics of material life, of a politics of the 'between' as an irresolvable tension, as a definitive split between *bios* and *zoé*.

The 'sexual contract' on which for centuries the separation between productive and reproductive work, between the public sphere and the private sphere was based is undergoing an irreversible crisis. This crisis of the symbolical patriarchal order involves politics, economy, sexuality, and has been brought about, among other factors, by feminism and by all the political movements that, starting from the 1960s, have questioned the traditions and costumes of Western societies. For decades, neoliberalism has appropriated these transformations, incorporating and transforming its principal tenets. In the moment that neoliberal governmentality exposes feminism to the danger of

7. H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University Press, Chicago, 1958.

8. G. Agamben, *Homo sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1988.

9. C. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1988.

10. C. Lonzi, *È già politica*, written with M. Grazia Chinese, M. Lonzi e A. Jaquinta, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, Milano, 1977.

assimilation and neutralization (Nancy Fraser),<sup>11</sup> it is necessary to return to the irreducible aspects of feminism to clearly mark the distance from the neoliberal perspective.

The question is, therefore: is care one of these irreducible aspects? Can care be transformed from a 'biopolitical agent' into an instrument to destabilize the neoliberal order? The problem is not so much the evident contiguity between neoliberalism and women's condition in globalized society, as much as that between neoliberalism and feminism. This problem involves, in different ways, both emancipatory feminism and so-called radical feminism. On the other hand, feminism has a privileged position in this situation: it is located precisely in the point in which neoliberal rationality can be punctured, to make room for something else, something that may serve to elaborate new political strategies and practices.

The feminist theoretical approach and the interpretative tools used by feminism offer crucial observation points. The importance of the symbolic order and the relevance of sexuality for politics are among the main tools through which feminism theories and practices have questioned Marxist economicism and decisively undermined classical political theory, eroding its keywords (citizenship, democracy, equality). The problem is applying these tools to a changed reality in order to invent new practices.

From this perspective, the question of 'labor' becomes of crucial importance. The entrance of women into the job market in the twentieth century has been the main vehicle of the participation of women in the public sphere. This connection between labor and citizenship has remained very close at least until the second half of the twentieth century. It was the participation in labor that started the processes of subjectivation and public acknowledgment, which preceded every time the formal acquisition of rights. Yet, while labor was the motor that led to the participation of women in the public sphere, something was left out of this process and remained an obstacle to it: the domestic labor of women, the labor of care, the silent labor that leaves no traces but on which all other labor relies.

'A woman's work,' from the time she gets up to the time goes to bed is as hard as a day at war, worse than a man's working day. Because she has to make her time-table conform to those of other people –her own family and the various organizations it's connected with [...] From the man's point of view a woman is a good mother when she turns this discontinuity into a silent and unobtrusive continuity. This silent continuity used to be regarded as life itself, not just one of its aspects, the same as work. And now we've got to the root of the matter or the bottom of the mine.<sup>12</sup>

11. N. Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism. From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, Verso, London, 2013.

12. M. Duras, *Practicalities*, Groove Press, New York, 1986, p. 45.

The question of ‘domestic’ labor has been at the center of feminist struggles and debates since the 1970s<sup>13</sup>. The labor of reproducing the living, the hidden, invisible but unavoidable labor, carried out in the closed space of the *oikos*, has always undermined the possibility of establishing a single unit of measure for labor, of quantifying the production of value. Even among male philosophers there are many who acknowledge that in the case of domestic labor there will always be an *excess*, a *difference* in subjectivity, a personal experience that cannot be reduced to any units of measure, since it is qualitatively different<sup>14</sup>. Behind all this, lies the *asymmetry* of power relations: it is the power over women that undermines the very possibility of measuring the quantity of labor using the same unit of measure.

Today the female work of care and reproduction, once unpaid or partially paid and defined as ‘servile,’ is no longer restricted to the private home. Its characteristics, in a society in which the service sector has become dominant, have extended to a large section of labor, to the point that sociologists speak of a ‘feminization of labor.’ The expression<sup>15</sup> designates a plurality of phenomena that characterize contemporary capitalism and neoliberal economic rationality: the collapse of the separation between productive and unproductive labor, between private time and labor time, between private sphere and public sphere, between production and reproduction; new forms of ‘live’ labor arise, tied to affectivity, to intimacy, to relations, to care, in which the product is inseparable from the producer.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, even the process of social reproduction is turned into labor, starting from conception, pregnancy, and birth<sup>17</sup>.

But the ‘feminization’ of labor raises also the question of the increasing presence of women in the job market in Western countries, which has been accompanied, on the other hand, with the transferal of care labor to women from other countries, as well as a decrease in the quality of the work in which women are present in great number<sup>18</sup>. This feminization of labor has been interpreted as a commodification of all aspects of life

13. A synthesis of the Marxist-feminist perspective can be found in S. Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero. Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, PM Press/Common Notions/Autonomea, 2012.

14. The representative of the Italian post-working class philosophy (in Italian postoperaismo), C. Marazzi discusses this in his *Il posto dei calzini. La svolta linguistica dell'economia e i suoi effetti sulla politica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 1999.

15. C. Morini, *Per amore o per forza. Femminilizzazione del lavoro e biopolitiche del corpo*, ombre corte, Verona, 2010.

16. E. Feder Kittay, *Love's Labour Essay on Women, Equality and Dependency*, Routledge, New York-London, 1999; A. Russell Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life. Notes from Home and Work*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 2003.

17. M. Cooper, C. Waldby, *Clinical Labour. Tissue Donors and Research Subjects in the Global Economy*, Duke University Press, 2014; M. Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neo-liberal Era*, Washington University Press, 2008.

18. B. Ehrenreich, A. Russell Hochschild, *Global Woman. Nannies, Maids and Aex Workers in the New Economy*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2002.



but also, for example within the Italian philosophy of sexual difference, as a chance to overcome this commodification: to positively account, from a perspective of difference, for the 'added value' that the labor of women implies when difference is not neutralized in the name of equality<sup>19</sup>.

But, when subjectivity itself is completely caught within a neoliberal perspective based on the idea of self-entrepreneurship, what, in the labor of women, can still 'exceed' the logic of commodification?

In the transition from liberalism to neoliberalism, the level of subjectivity replaces the objective level of the market and the economy; we go from the centrality of exchange to the centrality of the subjective dimension of entrepreneurship. Neoliberal governmentality operates within subjectivity through the notion of the subject as his or her own entrepreneur. In his last phase, Foucault explored new paths in the process of subjectivation, studying practices of the self that can counter power mechanisms. From a feminist perspective too, the key to distancing oneself from neoliberal 'self-entrepreneurship' lies in the identification of new strategies based on subjectivation processes more than on 'politics of care.' It is possible, for example, to draw a clear-cut distinction between the feminist notion developed within Italian feminism of 'partire da sé' ('starting from one self') and neoliberal 'self-entrepreneurship.'<sup>20</sup> Both modes of action have desire as their main motor but they differ profoundly in terms of their goals. The idea of starting from oneself in establishing relations with other women comes from the self-consciousness practices that, in the 1970s, placed subjectivity at the center of feminist politics. In a period in which everything was interpreted on the basis of ideological, objectifying schemes, 'starting from oneself' meant focusing on the lives of individuals, on their bodies and desires, on the material quality of life. Starting from oneself was proposed first and foremost as a practice of de-identification, a way to go beyond a submissive subjectivity and focus instead on a free one. Not a fluctuating, fragmented subjectivity, but a desire that starts with the self, independently of the trajectories of power, and inscribes itself in a political and relational dimension. Different from the desire that governs self-entrepreneurship which while producing mobile, multiple, unstable identities, tends, however, to coalesce around a single object: productivity, performance, the 'functioning' of the self.

19. AA.VV., *Il doppio sì. Lavoro e maternità*, Quaderni di Via Dogana, Milano, 2008.

20. The 'starting from oneself' (*partire da sé*) is a notion that was developed within Italian feminism based on self-consciousness practices. Carla Lonzi referred to it already in the 1970s but it appears first in *Libreria delle donne* di Milano, *Non credere di avere dei diritti*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino, 1987.

‘Starting from oneself and avoid being discovered,’ writes the Italian feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro<sup>21</sup>, to illustrate how in feminism desire always travels outside the trajectories of power, avoiding them. It is a question of rediscovering the deconstructive potential of self-consciousness, its capacity to erode the identifications and idealizations of neoliberalism, to lay bare a power that is no longer patriarchal, but is in a way more pernicious, because it acts through the desires, the bodies, and the liberties of individuals. The question today is not that of placing everything, feminine difference included, on the market, but that of identifying the elements, postures, the movements that elude it. To conceive ‘a justice that starting from the position of a woman will be valid for all,’<sup>22</sup> one must first of all ask oneself what remains outside a power whose goal is that of occupying all available spaces, every aspect of subjectivation processes, leaving no remainders. What remains outside is, first of all, sexual difference as a force that undermines the One of modern subjectivity, a force that resists the undifferentiated range of a flexible subjectivity, which is easily incorporated to neoliberal ideology. The multiple activated by sexual difference, by sexual bodies, is not the multiple of neoliberal logic, but the opening of a subjectivity that remains in continuous transformation, which does not follow self-promoting strategies, but remains in contact with the transformational power of the unconscious, with the desire without object that is at the basis of any relational opening.

Sexual difference opens the free space of the relation which, beyond any symbiotic lock, unbalances the self towards the other, towards a relation as a transformation of oneself and the other.

The entrepreneurship of the self includes forms of excess in a ‘surplus of enjoyment,’ favoring forms of ‘ultra-subjectivation’ that lead individuals to follow the imperative of the ‘always more.’<sup>23</sup> One must, therefore, start from the marginalized areas of neoliberalism, from the obstacles to the performativity of the new subject, to his or hers self-enjoyment. Women are a resource for this new subject because it assembles a number of feminine attitudes: the need to affirm oneself on the job (emancipation), the capacity to simultaneously operate at multiple levels (multitasking), the capacity for sacrifice (self-sacrificing subjectivity is rewarded), a performativity which is connoted in strongly sexual ways. Yet there is a feminine enjoyment that goes beyond this, or, in Muraro’s words, ‘a demand for enjoyment’<sup>24</sup> by women that leads beyond this type of subjectivity,

21. L. Muraro, ‘Partire da sé e non farsi trovare’, in Diotima, *La sapienza di partire da sé*, Liguori, Napoli, 1996, pp. 5-21.

22. S. Burchi, T. Di Martino (eds.), *Come un passaggio. Pensieri e pratiche tra lavoro e non lavoro*, Iacobelli, Roma, 2013.

23. P. Dardot, C. Laval, *The New Way Of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, Verso, London, 2014.

24. L. Muraro, *Al mercato della felicità. La forza irrinunciabile del desiderio*, Mondadori, Milano, 2009.

beyond the accumulation of desires and their spasmodic consumption, towards a 'desire without an object'.

Resistance, other forms of enjoyment, practices of authority: what we need here are new modalities based on the 'starting from oneself' (or, in Foucault's words, from the 'care of oneself'). If the liberty of women is a precarious liberty that must be brought into the world every time,<sup>25</sup> then it is necessary to propose a rewriting of the political, economic, domestic space, with lives as its reference point. Life must not be, as in biopolitics, an object of government, but a reference point for the construction (molecular, microphysical, contingent) of other relations, common spaces oriented towards another economy, another citizenship, another labor. Founded on the singular desires, on 'loving the world' more than 'taking care of it.'

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25. I. Dominijanni, "Libertà precaria", in T. Dini, S. Tarantino (eds.), *Femminismo e neoliberalismo. Libertà femminile versus imprenditoria di sé e precarietà*, Natan edizioni, Benevento, 2014, pp. 50-64.